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Sophomore Honors English

آسمان اور ستاروں

Every day I spent hours gazing at the sky. It was always so blue, so vast, so infinite. Clouds rarely made an occurrence on the sky stage, making the days seem a little more simplistic but beautiful in its simplicity. The night shows on the other hand, were always spectacular with the whole night lighting up with a million shining stars. When I was six my mother always told me that the stars above our heads were really the eyes of our loved ones, and that they were always watching over us. From then on I spent late nights up on my cement roof talking to my deceased relatives, my dead dog, and even some of the friends I had lost when my family moved into the compound years ago.

Before it had been so easy. I spent my days playing outside and attending school in Khuzdar. My father was gone a lot of the time for work but my mom kept the rest of the family working around the house too so it remained pretty clean for the most part. Khuzdar being a fairly decent district, there was rarely disease and our family was fortunate enough to never be affected. Then one day when I was about nine or so, while I was picking up around the house, my father burst in through the door dressed in a business suit and wearing a karakul on his head. At his side were his two black suitcases my four siblings and I were never allowed to open. I remembering dropping everything in my hands and rushing into his open arms, burying my face in his stomach. The cool fabric felt nice against my cheek and he smelled of lavender. After a chuckle he grabbed me and hoisted me up where he could properly give me

a nice warm hug. Then he asked, “Where is your mother? I have urgent news that I must share with you and the rest of the family?”. I looked around. I could hear my mother behind the house hanging up our clothes and I knew my siblings were probably out and about doing childish, mischievous things. I was in

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no hurry to get them all though. I wanted to spend a moment with my father alone since things like these seemed to happen less and less frequently.

Eventually by dinner the whole family managed to rendezvous at the kitchen table. After the general commotion died down and all the food had been served, my father shared his news.

“We are to be moving to Jalalabad. My work has sent me there for the next few years and so I figured that I might as well bring the whole family along. I know I haven’t been home enough to spend time with everyone but if we can make this trip then I would be able to see you guys every day!” His smile seemed to brighten up his news but we were not completely settled on the idea yet. We knew that we were not supposed to know what our father did for his job but moving so suddenly seemed strange.

“Where would we be staying?” my mother asked cautiously.

“One of my employers has generously offered services of both food and housing.” my father replied. He seemed excited for it, so I decided to be excited for him as well.

“I think that sounds like a swell idea!” I said, stuffing my mouth full of *Nehari*. “I can start packing as soon as dinner is over. When would we be leaving?”

“Tomorrow morning”, was the reply. My father’s voice was still energetic but underneath I could hear a much more serious tone, as if the topic was really not debatable after all. I figured that a tone like that meant that we were going regardless of what anybody else in the family thought.

We were out the door at sunrise. A black van was waiting for us at the end of the driveway, already running. We clambered in, one after another. The man driving the car wore a suit like my dads, but he had an earpiece in and wore sunglasses. He had a magnificent beard although the top of his head was completely bald. After we all squeezed in with our one duffel bag of belongings, the driver revved up the engine and we were off.

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No one spoke throughout the trip. It only took about an hour but by the end of the ride, my legs had fallen completely asleep. We stopped at a heavy gate where more men exited a booth nearby and asked for identification. The driver handed them a card and we were through.

Beyond the walls was a large cement wall, barricading the entire perimeter. We exited the car in front of the main entrance and every one of us shuffled out obediently. Without a word the driver got back into the car and sped off. We waited in complete silence for about ten minutes before someone showed up at the entrance. It was a large woman, most likely in her 40’s and dressed in robes. She opened the door and ushered us in.

Inside the compound there were two main buildings, a three story one off to the left and a smaller, one story building on the right. Surrounding the two buildings were stone paths and grass fields. The whole place seemed nice. But I couldn’t imagine living within the walls. The lady silently directed us to the smaller house on the left, opening the door for us and gesturing to us that we would be staying there for the time being.

After our initial experience with the compound, the entire family quickly grew used to it. We were all pleasantly surprised when a tall bearded man opened our door later that evening and brought us a feast. Duck, beef, rolls, rice, and assorted vegetables steamed from trays and platters. I had never seen so much cooked food at once. Even though my family and I were better off than most people living in

Pakistan, I could have definitely used a few extra pounds here and there. The man introduced himself to us, telling us to call him *Miskeen Kaka* (poor uncle). He seemed genuinely friendly and over the course of the months that followed, we began to get accustomed to the compound. My studies resumed but privately from one of the women that lived in the big house. I took lessons with two other boys my age, who lived in a different guest house. Their families had moved in around the same time as us. I had plenty of time to play with them, and we spent lots of hours exploring every nook and cranny of the compound. But we were never allowed out. I never saw anyone enter or exit. It never occurred to me

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how we had seemingly endless quantities of food and water. And how we were given new clothes every month. At first I was fine living confined within the walls. I didn’t mind it that much. However, as time passed, I began to yearn for the outside world again. I spent more and more time thinking about my friends I had left behind so suddenly. The home I had left without really saying goodbye. I wondered if people back home wondered where I was. Eventually I began to spend more time wishing I was outside than living my life inside.

The average day became so monotonous. Wake up. Study. Eat lunch. Finish up studying. Go play until dinner. Chat at dinner with the other families. Return home. Go to bed. Repeat. My father was usually out the door before I was up and only returned after I had gone to bed. I saw him even less than before. The cycle became perpetual. There was no adventure. No sense of fun. I wished something, anything could happen. Anything at all to change up my daily life.

The ruffling sound of muffled helicopter rotors cut through the dry night shaking loose cement and showering me in a white powder. With a Pakistani Military Base just a few kilometers from the compound, the sounds of planes and helicopters were not new to me, even at oddest hours of the night.

Dismissing the noise as a mere nuisance, my head returned back to it's resting position against the old mattress and I closed my eyes.

*Boom!* The loud sound of explosions and metal screeching down to the dirt jolted me up once again. This time I knew that the Military Base was not involved. My father was instantly out of bed, rummaging through our one closet to find his gun. My mother and my four siblings crouched up against the rough plaster walls, hands on knees, trying to make themselves as small as possible.

“Takim get down and stay out of sight!” my father hissed as he took a crouching position with the barrel of his gun pointed at the wooden door. I could hear heavy boots moving across the yard. The people outside ran with their heels first, trying to minimize the noise that they were making but the dry twigs and branches made their attempts futile.

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“Ahmed al-Kuwaiti,” a voice from outside shouted. “Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, come out”. The shouts were followed by a spray of gunfire from outside. Pieces of shattered glass fell into my mothers lap as she clutched my siblings. Suddenly, with a sharp pop the one light in the guest house was blown to bits, rendering us in almost complete darkness.

“Father, what is going on?” I asked, crawling underneath the master bed in the center of the room. Any sense of drowsiness had completely left me by this point. My senses were alert and I was running on pure adrenaline.

My father looked back at me. Despite the casual look he forced onto his face his eyes were filled with terror. “Nothing you have to worry about. Just crawl over to your mother and she’ll take ca-”

I flinched as the splintering of wood filled the quiet night. My mother screamed as father’s body hit the ground with a thud. Wide eyed, I crawled further back underneath the bed frame. I felt like I

couldn’t speak and I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t even blink. Mother continued to scream in anguish as the wails of my siblings joined her. She stood up. Grabbing the hands of both my siblings, she stared petrified at the door.

“Mama, do not go through that door!” I begged from underneath the bed. I reached out my hands to gesture her to come back but I immediately recoiled when I felt a warm liquid at the base of the bed. My father’s blood had begun to seep down towards me under the bed.

Unfortunately my mother didn’t hear me. She undid the latch to the lock. Creeping out, I could hear two men shout at her, “Come here” in Arabic.

“He is dead,” my mother said to one of the men. “You shot him. He is dead. You killed him.”

Bang. Bang.

Two sets of boots appeared in the doorway. I held my breath, retracting my arms towards my chest. The two men stood above the body of my father.

Bang. Bang. Bang. Three shots into his chest.

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Whimpering, I still made sure not to reveal myself. I didn’t know if they had killed the rest of my family, but it was clear that they had no problem killing my father. The two sets of boots continued down the hallway to the kitchen area. I heard the crinkling and shattering of broken pottery bowls and cups as the two men stomped around the kitchen. Finally, after about two minutes of searching, they met back up at the doorway.

“Shots fired C1, building is secure at this time.” I heard one of the men say. The man tossed a tube down at the doorway, and the two of them left hurriedly.

It became quiet again after that. The only sounds came from the crickets outside and the dripping of water coming from the kitchen. I shifted uncomfortably, hoping to get some blood into my drowsy limbs. Finally, I decided to crawl out from underneath the bed. I couldn’t bring myself to look at the corpse of my father as I crept out the door. As I left the building, I could hear an explosion at the entrance to the main house.

Creeping silently, I managed to follow the men towards the gate. There, I saw about two dozen heavily armed soldiers dressed completely in black enter the bottom floor of the compound. Each one was at least six feet tall and armored everywhere on their body. They had planted a heavy explosive to destroy their way into the compound, and I noticed a helicopter slanted up against the outside of the southern wall. I knew that these mercenaries weren’t going to be content with just murdering my family. They were going to kill everyone in the compound. My fists clenched. I was terrified and scared of course. But I was also infuriated by the abrupt invasion of these men. And in the back of my head I knew I was excited a little bit too. Finally something had happened. But I felt terrible for thinking like that and I dismissed that thought as fast as I could. As I stealthily approached the entrance to the building, I was illuminated for a moment by the moon and the stars outside as a cloud finished it’s passing.

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I winced as my feet crunched over the shards of broken glass and pottery. My long wiry hands felt along the walls, trying to guide me towards the stairs. It was good that I was thin though. It helped me duck behind walls and stay out of sight. Peering around through the darkness, the invaders - *no, the murderers,* I thought - had left a clear trail up the stairs.. Part of me hoped that they would just hurry up and leave, while another part wanted to pick up one of the broken fragments that lay around my bare feet and bury it deep in the necks of all the men upstairs. The thought of violence upset me at first. Then the

flashing image of my father being shot in the head. My mother screaming as she clutched my baby brother and running from the room. Hiding behind the entrance, I watched the military men shoot my convulsing father, riddling him with bullet holes before storming out. It was clear that my father was not the intended target. The sounds of creaking floorboards above me brought me back to the present. I had navigated through the kitchen and had almost reached the bottom of the spiral staircase by now. Looking up, I could see the bright red laser that was facing the top of the stairs. I knew that behind that laser was a fully automatic weapon and behind the gun a cold-hearted killer. I had counted about two dozen men enter the main building, and had decided to wait about three minutes before following. I had heard multiple gunshots on the first and second floor but I knew better than to assume my companions were still alive. The few guards that stayed in the compound didn’t stand a chance against a squad of obviously highly trained soldiers. Now, standing completely still at the bottom of the staircase, I waited for the red light to go away. By tilting one ear up towards the top of the staircase, I heard voices on the second floor. A splinter had wedged itself in my foot, and up until now I had not even noticed. Staying as still as I could, I managed to pry it out, biting my lips to stop myself from making any sound.

“Hey, buddy, you might want to watch out for that door,”

“Roger. Now stand back.”

I heard the door upstairs explode. The heavy sound of boots rushing through the door, clearing it for people no doubt. I winced, that was Khalid’s room. Khalid was the son of the man who was commonly

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referred to as *Miskeen Kaka* (poor uncle) by all the kids on the compound. He got that name because he didn’t leave the house much and so everyone figured it was because he didn’t have any money to spend. The stairs squeaked as I slowly creeped up the stairs. I could feel sticky blood and shrapnel as I crawled on my hands and knees over the second story landing.

I didn’t think I could kill a man. The idea of taking someone’s life seemed more than unsettling to me. Because if I was to kill someone, I wouldn’t just be ending their life. I would be ending their hopes and dreams as well. My father, who had been so loving to me, despite having five children and having to work all the time was forever gone from my life. I looked down. My hands had balled themselves up into fists just thinking about it. *All the same,* I thought, *people need to pay for the things that they do.*

As I passed the stairs I saw the gun laying there. It was still propped up against the wall. Like my father, Khalid slept with an AK-47 next to him at night, in case of emergencies just like this. The banana mag was already attached to the gun. However, I never heard Khalid fire a shot. He was never proud that he had it and he was always upset whenever he was forced to practice with it. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem like Khalid had a fair chance to put his gun training to any use. The armed men, SEALS they had called themselves, had completely demolished his room. As I crept through it, I noticed that all of the pictures on the walls, the stack of photographs Khalid always had, every piece of information, was gone. The SEALS must have collected everything as they passed through. The hard barrel was warm with Khalid’s blood as I crawled past it. Thoughts of my father standing in the front yard teaching me how to fire his pistol crossed my mind as I grasped the grip of the gun. The sound of boots on the wooden floorboards above my head were completely different from the noises that they made when they crept over the concrete. This time they were in a hurry. Carrying the rifle, I continued to follow the SEALS path of destruction, creeping behind them silently and patiently.

As I stood in front of the third floor stairs, a sudden wave of nausea washed over me. My father was gone. Khalid was gone. My uncle was upstairs and so were over twenty NAVY SEALS. I fell to the

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floor as the full weight of those words overcame me. A few years ago, a few men in suits came knocking on our door back at home. They talked with my father for what seemed like hours. When I went in to deliver snacks to the men, I overheard them talking about how the United States Government had been sending NAVY SEALS on scouting missions near the area. Now these same men had followed my family to our new home in Abbottabad. These men were American soldiers trained to be the most elite type of warriors sworn to protect the peace. Then I wondered, *why are they here?* All of the families in the compound were law abiding, safe, courteous Pakistani citizens. *So what are they doing here? In Pakistan of all places?*

I stood up. It didn’t matter how many soldiers had come or how well they had been trained.They had killed my family and they had started the fight. Being possibly one of the only survivors, I knew that the job to defeat the invaders rested on my shoulders now. Ultimately, it had become my job to protect our home.

With a new spark of determination, I crept up the stairs towards the third floor. I had checked the slide of the rifle and double checked the magazine. There were at least 30 bullets and no more than 25 SEALS. *This is possible!* I told myself. I just had to make sure I knew what I was doing. I had fired off rounds before but never all at once and never at another human being. The thought of it made my stomach upset at first, but I swallowed it and forged on. By the time I got close to the top of the stairs, I was sure that the SEALS had their guns trained on where my head was going to come up. My heart was beating so loudly, I was sure that the men upstairs could hear it. Dropping to the wooden floorboards, I was able to peek around. I could smell the familiar dirt and sweat, but there was something else in the air that made me uncomfortable. Despite the 26 degree weather, I felt a shiver down my spine when I realized what I was smelling.

Blood.

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My feet made barely a sound as I crept along the third floor. In my hands clutched the shaking gun I froze as I heard a shot come from my uncles room. I crept up towards the door, holding my breath, trying to listen in on the conversation.

“I think this is our boy,” I heard one of the men say in a burly voice.

“Walt and I will run with this,” Another gruff voice replied. I froze. That was one of the men that came into the guest house and shot my dad. I gritted my teeth. He was going to be first.

“Roger,” the first man replied

“Hey, we have a significant amount of SSE on the second deck,” I heard one of the men say over their walkie talkies, “We’re going to need any extra bodies over here”

Damn. More people meant more reinforcements. That I was running out of time.

The men inside got real quiet after that. I dared to peek my head in. A cluster of them were squatting in a circle around another body. *Oh god,* I thought. *Please don’t let it be Miskeen Kaka!* One of the men sprayed water on the figure’s face, revealing the features amongst all the blood. It was him. It was my uncle lying face up against the floor. I squeaked and ducked back against the wall, sinking to my knees clutching the gun. From outside, I heard one of them say aloud,

“For God and country, I pass Geronimo. Geronimo E.K.I.A.”

*Geronimo? Who was Geronimo?* I wondered. Maybe that wasn't my uncle after all. Maybe that was someone who just looked like him that the SEALS brought here. Busy hoping that my uncle wasn’t dead after all, I failed to notice another one of the SEALs come up the stairs. He saw me before I saw him.

“Hey! You!” he shouted, pulling his gun up to his right eye. “Drop your weapon!”

The voice startled me I knew that I didn’t have enough time to shoot. My heart continued to beat in my eardrums as I set my gun down on the floor. He came over and scooped it up. By this time four of the men from inside ran out to see what was going on.

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“Hey where’d you find this one?” one asked.

“Right here under your nose.” the man with the gun replied.

I decided to avoid speaking and wait for my moment to strike, while silently cursing myself. *How could I have let this happen?* I thought as they picked me up. The pushed me into the bedroom, where I could see the body’s face even clearer. My hope fell down back into my stomach like a stone as I realized that it was my uncle after all. Silently fuming, I was forced into a corner of the room while one of the men watched over me. I looked around. There were no guns I could reach from my sitting position but I was fairly certain I could get the gun of the man guarding me if I surprised him. I tensed, waiting for my moment. At this point I knew that there was no way I was getting out of this alive. And strangely, I had accepted it. My hands no longer shook from fear, but from adrenaline. I was ready to make my last stand in an attempt to avenge those who had come into our homes and massacred us like pigs. I did a quick silent prayer, apologizing for all my mistakes in the past and asking for the forgiveness of all those who had passed over the span of the last fifteen minutes or so. I asked God to forgive me for what I was about to do. After I was finished, I felt as if my mettle was as strong as iron. The walkie talkie buzzed on one of the men looking through my uncle’s photographs.

“We need all able personnel to get down to A1. We need to get this body to the HELO.”

The man guarding me turned around, raising one of his hands as if to ask a question or point something out.

I lunged.

My teeth sunk in around the man’s arm and he yelped in surprise. Spinning around, I made a desperate reach for the sidearm on the man’s side but he swatted my hand away. I headbutted him in the chest, forcing the grip on the gun to slacken. With a solid kick, it fell to the ground with a clatter. I made a desperate lunge for the fallen gun. Then pain. All I could feel was pain.

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I looked down at my leg. A bullet fired from one of the other men had gone straight through my upper thigh. Dark thick blood began to squirt out. Gritting my teeth, I looked around for the shooter. The one who I affiliated with my father’s death held a handgun pointed directly at my forehead. Sitting back, I pressed my leg, trying to put pressure on it and stop the bleeding.

“What do I do about this one?” The man with the gun asked.

“Give the little son-of-a-bitch to me and I’ll tear his tongue out of his mouth!” the one I attacked said through gritted teeth. He clutched his arm where I bit him.

“No. There’s no need for that” a man said walking in. “Although we can’t have any more adolescent casualties. So this one will have to be off the books. Got it?” he said to the man with the gun. “And make it quick please. He doesn’t need to suffer anymore.”

I looked around the room again, analysing my surroundings. There was nothing I could grab that would give me any hope of surviving. Defeated, I turned my head back around to the man. But on the way my eye caught sight of something.

Out the window, a million stars shone once again. Each one seemed to blink at me, ushering me towards them. I used a blood soaked hand to wipe a tear from my eye. I knew that my father was one of

those blinking lights up there, so far away. But as I heard a loud bang to my right, I knew that I was to be reunited with him again, and this time nothing would be able to tear us apart.

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* 2 MH-60 Helicopters carrying soldiers were sent down to the compound.
* clear skies made flying easy that night.

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* OBL had been living in the compound for five years.
* what a Karakul is (it's a hat by the way)

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* Miskeen Kaka title
* At one point television was completely banned from the compound.
* The children of the compound didn’t know who Osama Bin Laden actually was.
* They were not allowed to know about him nor what he had done.

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* typical meal was *Dhal* for dinner.
* People made Chicken Karaii for occasions.
* Suhur is religious food, especially during Ramadan.

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* contradiction of initial learnings from *No Easy Day* leading to an eventual understanding of facts.
* OBL had asked for families to move in with him, and thought that they would be used for protection and sacrifice if an invasion like the one in 2011 would occur.
* The compound in Abbottabad was near the Pakistani military base. The soldiers often ended up flying right over OBL without knowing it.
* Almost no one was supposed to know OBL lived in the compound. He was supposed to have disappeared off the grid.

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* While OBL was hiding in Abbottabad, he had little to no communication to Al Qaeda. They had moved on from him at that point.
* Since he was no longer involved with Al Qaeda nearly as much as before, he spent a lot more time within the walls of the compound.
* Compound was able to survive due to enormous financial support due to the family of OBL.

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* SEALS discovered OBL was hiding in Pakistan
* SEALS knew the name of the guards of the compound
* Helicopter made a crash landing onto the southern wall of the compound, with the tail sticking up over the wall.
* SEALS used explosive charges to make their way into the compounds different buildings.
* SEALS split up into teams, each team assigned a different area of the compound to investigate after OBL was killed.
* mix of wooden and cement floorboards throughout the main structure.
* the guesthouse/family house was made of cement.
* Dialogue
* Assigned name Geronimo for OBL.
* SEALS brought silenced and non silenced weapons.
* SEALS killed Khalid before Khalid fired any bullets.
* Khalid owned and operated an AK-47 rifle but did not use it during the night of the invasion.
* Takim’s father fired off multiple rounds before he was shot through the door by Navy SEALS.
* SEALS took 32 minutes to complete the operation. Most of the time was spent collected data from OBL’s hideout.
* Takim’s mother fled through the open door after the attack and was captured. However, she was not killed.
* Compound had two main sections, a main house and a guest house. Between the two section was a courtyard.
* Osama Bin Laden’s house had three stories.
* SEALS invaded the guest house before entering the main house.

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* Takim had experience with guns prior to the invasion.
* Knew how to handle a firearm.
* children were expected to know how to fire a gun in case OBL needed people to defend him.